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Metaphors That We Live, Work and Thrive By and With – Reflections on the Methods of Artistic Practice

I

What do you do when you do what you do? Let us repeat this promising litany to enjoy its inherent rhythm and rhyme: What do you do when you do what you do?

That is the question. Sure it is. It's an open-ended, constantly evolving set-up, a proposition so to speak, a path leading towards the creating and generating of sites and situations, the making and shaking of expectations and experience. It is a question you ask yourself – every now and then – and it is the question you ask a new acquaintance or an old friend whom you have not met in many years – also every now and then.

This is what you ask, and the answer will direct us into something called a practice. It is a human activity that is constructed and consumed as both–and. It is personal and collective, inside and outside, private and shared. It is the beginning of a beginning, an ongoing act that constantly returns to the sender for yet another route and round to be taken and followed up. It is bound, in the most positive and productive sense; it is bound for the re-bound. The point is that how the original question is approached and then answered depends strongly on how that answer is listened to, how much time and energy is invested in it, in the interaction, and how it is then acted upon.

With the help of the metaphors we live, work and thrive by and with, we can label it *call and response*, or we can name it *catch and release*.[1] Thus, as a grand opening into the core of what is a practice, we have the context of a choir, or we look up for the parameters of a fishing trip. Take your pick, follow your instincts, and please move on: get on with it.

II

Practice? What is a practice? What is included, what is excluded and why?

Practice is an activity based on and built upon its roots and routes. It is the day-in and day-out, concentrated, committed and compassionate activity that connects the dots between its past, present and future articulation and actualisations, manners and manifestations. Characteristically, it goes deeper; it endures, gains proximity, does not run after or circle round in the distance. Practice is not about standing on the sidelines, it is not about slipping and sliding sideways. It is an art – the art of the almost. Filled with hesitation and doubt, but maintained and cherished with the wish and desire to 'keep on keeping on'.

In other words, practice is not about a solid rock, a pre-paid existence or an assumed, hoped-for exactness. It is not about rules or regulations that you painstakingly follow and try to implement, if not implicate. Practice is an on-going process of searching for the intent and intention of the heart of the thing that one is, actually and factually, in the process of trying to do and achieve. Embodied and committed practice requires protection and challenge, attention and tension and a concentrated, condensed push and pull. It is in constant need of and requires checks and balances, clashes and confrontations – you know, shaking the tree and then making sure that the tree is intact and healthy.

Practice is about becoming – a place, a version of the content of the act, the very act of doing things in continuity and achieving an expression of and with it.

Practice is a creative treatment of an actuality. Something that is to be remembered, repeated and worked through in and along our daily life, in and through its giddy Wednesday mornings and lazy Friday afternoons.

Thus, already now, we can conclude that practice is a serious business. For sure, and for real.

The above-described short outline of a practice is dedicatedly informed by the ongoing research linked to Aristotle (1976), dating back 2400 years into our discursive and conceptual histories. It is a re-reading of Aristotle done by Hans-Georg Gadamer (2004) and Paul Ricoeur (1984), addressing our historically affected consciousness and how our identities are narrated within the quest for a good life: a search during which we are looking in the same direction but passionately disagreeing with what we are seeing and how what we see affects us and our activities.

So far so good: this part is clear, i.e. what it opens up to and stands for. If we change direction, what then are the dangers that a long-term committed practice will encounter and have to deal with?

We raise the stakes and are no longer interested in the individual practice by itself – i.e. what architects do when they do what they do – but we shift our focus to the social and political levels, to structures within which that practice arouses and engages with and besides, by and off, longing while belonging.

This is because the act of doing what you do when you are doing what you do (when done in accordance with an invested ability to laugh at oneself and the vital readiness to fail and to do that failing with the aim of trying to fail a little bit better) is precisely never neutral, innocent or objective. It is embedded into each and every particular society, its expectations and anticipations, the secrets that it speaks when asleep.

No matter what the given society of concern (here, we are talking about the overall assumptions we have of OECD countries), the dangers that a practice must live with and deal with are more or less the same. On the one hand, we have the private sector as well as its close cousin, the bureaucratic structure. We have something called liberal market capitalism (again, differently actualised in places such as Sweden or Singapore, i.e. welfare vs authoritarian state), and we have corrosive effects of state power (comparative approach between Estonia and East Berlin – in the former virtually everything is digitalised and transparent and while less so in the latter).[2]

What is it that we must try to do and achieve in these conditions that can be labelled as reality, such as a concrete jungle or, set down in another vernacular, the brutality of the fact? We turn to a contemporary philosopher who is sustaining the promise and beauty of the old Aristotelian way of thinking. "In this situation, what is most urgently needed is a politics of self-defence for all those local societies that aspire to achieve some relatively self-sufficient and independent form of participatory practice-based community".[3]

According to MacIntyre, what makes a practice be taken into account as a practice are these three interconnected points and positions.

1. *Agreement of common good:* A wide range of agreement on what it is that this particular practice tries to do, to address and stand for – and why it does so. The focus is on the so-called internal goods, i.e., what it is that makes the very act in a continuum more worthwhile and not less, and not external goods, which are always pretty much the same through the variable fields and faunas, such as status, wealth, financial benefits, etc.
2. *Shared and open participation on a small-scale:* Why? Because in any extended chronological trajectory of more than a quarter of a year – such as thinking through and making concepts, or designing products for better living – this is only possible when done in collaboration and interaction with others looking in the same direction and cherishing similar interests, integrity and constancy. And no, it is not possible to find and maintain the focus when the group becomes too large and loses its ability to dig deeper and stay focused on the issues, the content.
3. *Shared standards of argumentation:* This refers to the act of listening coherently and consequently, being constantly aware of not just talking over and over. This is the willingness and ability to question and disagree but doing so in a manner that enables the process, the activity, to keep moving and not become stale or stagnant.[4]

Moreover, these principles serve as guiding lights, not as building blocks or slalom cones. They are not against anything, not the big financial institutions nor the huge bureaucratic structures. Instead, they support something that brews and grows inside the process, in and through its both expected and surprising explorations and engagements.

III

So, hand on heart, what is the actual content of the type of practice that is being promoted and proposed right here and now?

This is the moment when we make a significant transition from *what* to *how*. Quite predictably, this *how* it is possible to achieve and conduct, to do either a little bit better or not so well and effectively. One of the main traits, or should we call it the snorkel for sanity for the *how* part of the practice, is something that is linked to any given practice at its inception. This is the profile and self-image of the one doing the thing, taking part in and continuing a given practice.

The widely varied differentiation of the routes taken within a practice can be effectively explained by describing its negative moods and aspirations. The more civilised metaphor for this would be the following: are you really ready to play the part or are you just glad to be able to dress up for it?

The slightly less civilised way is to take stock with a saying that is heavily used in a language game called Finnish. It is a local type of conceptual knowledge production that goes like this: When climbing a tree, be aware of the way in which you are doing this. In a concrete sense and sensibility: when doing the thing you do, climbing the tree, are you doing this with your ass up or the other way round?

Needless to say, even if you choose to try to climb a tree with your ass up, a lot of things will happen as a result of this. With some luck, it might even look to a benevolent outsider that you are doing the actual thing. Evidently, you generate energy and you make a lot of sounds and gestures, but gravity pulls as it always does and, to be frank, trying to deny this is a serious decision (a fun but undeniable fact: no matter how well you are protected, falling on your head will hurt more than falling on your bottom).

So, if and when we want to avoid doing whatever we are doing in the wrong order, the wrong way and for the wrong reasons, how do we achieve this?

Another way to address this issue (which is an honest dilemma that is and will always remain with us) is to be aware of the position, not the pose you are taking and are in the act of producing. The negative prospect is a situation called profile neurosis. This is the unfortunate confusion of the roles you take, the incoherent hats you put on and the consequences of these choices. The partial answer for avoiding this type of neurosis, which is common but unproductive, is to be sure and self-aware, not cocky but self-assured, which applies to the point of view you are taking in the production of how to do things when you do them.

This chosen position from which you speak and act is not objective, it is never completely new and it always has its past versions and interpretations. To underline the importance of this particular type of grounded thought (what we do when we do what we do) does not come from out of nowhere. We look, gaze, take part and try to survive in and through the process of coming from somewhere, being active at a certain site and situation, a specific time and place, and looking towards a particular version of the things to come, i.e., the future.

This is then a version of the *how* that is long-term, slow and often collaborative, even if its results can be articulated singly or collaboratively, in components or as a *Gesamtkunstwer*k. This is not the role of a great pretender, nor is it the fantasy of a great leap forward. It is a procedural pact that relies on acts which have been done before while taking and remaking these acts into newly interpreted versions, which are then shared and nurtured.

You are aware of where you are coming from and the multiple traditions underlying the given practice, but you are seeing, feeling and thinking of this not as a burden but as a platform on which to act and move forward. This type of action takes place, tries to find a way to find a way – while constantly negotiating and navigating – in between confrontations and affirmative acceptance, realising its own method of becoming what it has the potential to be, turning into an actuality of a clever and joyful act of both subversion

1 *The Mariebjerg Textile*, a project by Maria Mengel, Tine Bernstorff Aagaard, Jonathan Houser, and Sara Gebran. Photo: Karina Tengberg.

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2, 3 The project focuses on rapidly shifting between individual and collective tasks and alternating between various tools and approaches. The students cannot withdraw into themselves; they must act, react, rewrite, overwrite, share, and help one another. Photos: Maria Mengel.

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3

and what are called aikido moves. In other words, you make the best use of the energy around you, sometimes against you, turning it, the adversarial or expressed negativity, into something else, something productive and hopefully aesthetically pleasing and beneficial.

IV

Now please take a breath and try to avoid the lure of the emergency door, because now we will finally concentrate on an example of turning towards an issue, rather than chasing the tail of its phantom.

It is not an example that I had to invent or spend much time and effort looking for. It is an example at the Royal Danish Academy located at the exhibition site of *In the Making – Artistic Methods in Architecture and Design*, at the far end wall of the spacious high-ceiling space. It is one of the 26 projects in the exhibition, and this particular one is titled *The Mariebjerg Textile*. I have been told that its site's action, recollection, thinking and work-through is a local cemetery. But no, you do not need to melancholically wait at the cemetery gates; you are gladly and pleasantly invited into it.

At one level, what we see is more than we might initially imagine. We have the work, a large-scale textile work on the wall. The work is impressive, it is accurate, it is elegant. It does what a good (sorry, let me rephrase it), great work of art ought to do (regardless of its categorisations and the feeble protests of the gatekeepers): surprise us in a beautiful way. It achieves what is required, wanted and often lacking: it is sensuous and sensitive but not sentimental.

As a work of art, it is a kind of tapestry, or a mural of a painting, put together from many different parts, but this time round, the parts are achieving their purpose in a manner that makes the end result in what is known as a rare creature. It is more, much more than just a sum of its parts. There is sewing, there is writing, there are images drawn together and painted around, and there are outlines of maps and terrains. It is suggestive and seductive, a wonderful interplay between multiple details and its convincing whole. There is a mess, but with a delicate purpose. It all comes together so that it is a pleasure to look at, stay with, and be with – to engage in a conversation, a physical narrative.

Strangely, as a collaborative effort, it also manages to achieve its stated purpose. This is a project that clearly and evidently knows the productive and proper way to go – and how to climb that allegorical tree of practice-based knowledge. Fittingly, the programme at the Institute of Architecture and Culture, within which this great piece is conducted, is called *Taking Place*. A wonderful name that, quoting from the project page on the exhibition website, examines "relationships between maps, mapping, and place as spatial, bodily, and collective fieldwork practice". It involves professors as teachers (three of them), students as participants (more than thirty), and an external partner profiled as a writer, choreographer, dancer and educator (one person).

As an end result of a complex process, I like it, and the more I dwell on it, the more I get out of it. To put what is to be achieved and accomplished, to be gotten, into a song (to paraphrase an enduring classic) is: I can't get enough, I just can't get enough of the funky stuff.

To quote again, I simply can't resist it (the same website source as above): "The approach is based on an interest in finding, not inventing, in absorbing, not performing, and in listening, not solving".

Without hesitation, without the slightest shadow of remorse, I'll drink to that.

V

So, see, how about it? How lucky we are, now that we have and possess an example that provides us with something we can take with us to recall and cherish. We have content, context and accomplishment.

Yet back on the often dreaded and weary planet Earth, among and along its complex and confusing conditions of conditions, we need to have the courage to deal with the expectations and anticipations, again, and in so doing, in the both-and combination of individual and structural needs and necessities.

This is done, here and now, by asking yet another question. What are they good for, these methods of artistic practice, methods that might or might not lead to research – perhaps, perhaps, perhaps – but which are nevertheless ubiquitous and activated and embedded in each and every practice. Not in the outer spheres of action, nor hidden away in the supplements, but at the very heart of it all.[5]

Therefore, it is important to stress that a practice is a singular entity. Not a one-off, because then it would barely touch upon what it could be. Practice is singular, but it is that singularly framed directional identity on the move, in and through give and take, in connection and contiguous with many. What works, what makes a practice function slightly better rather than not so well, is a matter – as mentioned earlier – of the internal goods in action and service, how they are defined, described, used and sometimes abused. The knowledge and the content stem from within, but never in an impermeable environment, but constantly interact with similar actions and reactions, tension and attention. And yes, even if it sounds like a cliché, it most certainly is not. Practice is learning by doing the thing and letting the doing of it inform and affect one's decisions, editing in and out, choosing this and not that way of how to continue.

Artistic practice requires a lot of stamina and sometimes stubbornness, but it is possible to achieve this and hold it close. It demands a lot from the individual doing the things that need to be done. Borrowing from another language, Yiddish, this involves reconnecting with the saying that whatever we do, whatever we strive to be and become, we must be able to maintain a balance. We must be both–and. We've got to be both a *mensch* and a *macher*.

In this equation, you have the side of the empathic person who is being affected and has an effect on one's surroundings, who thinks through and feels for the holistic overall frame. But at the same time, never symmetrically in one spot, but coming together entwined in the ongoing process, you must have the courage to make decisions, stand tall and be proud of your decisions, your choices – and to take part in the production of sensuous knowledge. Thus, it is about searching for ways of being both a *mensch* and a *macher*.

When articulated in broader terms, this spells out a strategy that is opposed to and situated as the opposite of the idea of one size fits all. The internal logic of a practice is dealt with, confronted in and through the very unique act that takes turns and comes around to slowing down or alternately accelerating its rhythm, rhyme and repetition. There is no mass production, no prospect of scaling up or down, but no promise of a long tail either. All that there is, all that is done and re-done in and through that very practice, respecting and cherishing what's special, worthwhile and promising to and with it. And no, no need to worry, this is not to glorify simple acts or to state that less is more or that less is a bore – what this implies is the recognition of what an artistic practice is good for and what it is not.

In a simple set-up of sites and sides that are chosen for, cherished and recognised, sometimes celebrated, it is about human intelligence, not the other one.

To repeat: a practice, its inner logic of searching for internal goods is one in many, not many in one. And yes, these individual, wonderful but vulnerable logics co-exist next to one another in interaction, yet again they are manifested as places of distinguished identities. This requires respect for the uniqueness of that very ongoing set of acts, implying respect for its particular and non-naïve versions of locally actualised versions of itself. This does not fight against or deny the processes of copying or scaling up that might function in other fields of society, but they are alien and counterproductive within an artistic practice framework. It is a practice that seeks openness, bouncing off its ideas with other participants in accordance to its own particular vocabulary and specific ways in order not to close itself off or disappear down what, for perfectly correct reasons, is called a rabbit hole.

In fact, what this respect and recognition of the uniqueness of a practice means is more crucial than protecting and cherishing the oneness of the content of a given practice. The implications reach towards the acknowledgement of continuity and community, linking us to the realisation that whatever we do, we do it in circumstances, social and political contexts, and situations that are inherently plural, on the move, and never single nor settled.

This is then called the richness of being in the world. In terms of the content of artistic practice, it is richness as the potential abundance of methods for trying to do what you want to do in a slightly better way. It can be labelled as created and generated added value, but remember that this added value is intrinsic, not the opposite. This proposition, a train of thought coming from a clearly defined somewhere and moving towards an *Ahnung* of somewhere else, that needed missing link of an educated guess, points out that each practice must develop, experiment and fail better, in coherence with its inner logic of internal goods, providing and maintaining the method that takes place in each case, in each articulation of matters that matter.

As has been the purpose repeated all along, this cannot survive if done in a vacuum; it must take place in interaction, in a process where you give a little and take a little. One step at a time, while constantly addressing and acting from a certain perspective, a pronunciation of the acts of a practice based on the wants, aims, fears and desires that are grounded and generated in and through it. In other words, it's a mess, but what the hell, it's our mess

– the one and only mess that we have access to and truly and duly possess the available tools to have an effect upon.

What emerges is an open-ended, communicated and shared view and vision of an artistic method that is in each of our deepest, sincerest self-interests. We care and share, not because we want to be part of a do-gooders brigade. We do to get closer and stay close to the evolving and annoyingly difficult content of the practice we are engaged in. It is about *thisness*, not thatness. It is about trying to get closer, staying near and next to the inherent content of action that is not about its whatness, but its singular ways of being and becoming. Seriously and significantly, yet also playfully and compassionately.

When stated with the help of yet another vernacular, please do not diminish yourself; do not succumb to the lame role of a tourist. Why? Well, because the universally acknowledged fact is that everyone hates the tourist. Consequently, if there is one thing we all might be able to fully agree on, hating yourself when you are trying to do what you do when you do it is NOT a good idea, not even near so.

It is not a consensus that we are after, not a committee decision – nor a shy, passive-aggressive settlement. It is not a self-congratulatory round of applause for anything and everything we do. One philosophical concept for it is called reasonable disagreement; another, less contractual, is a loving conflict.

The richness of being consequently means the facing of uncertain, plural means of existence and experience that are always part of the problem and, at the same time, part of the time and site-bound solution. You must be able to take risks and fail, but fail so that you are able to get back up again. And please stay agile and alive, and do not descend into a mental or physical roadblock.

This open-ended process of practice might hurt but, surprisingly and most likely, it will also heal. There are no guarantees, no securities, but like the good old light bulb in the attic, a writer called Voltaire wrote in a letter to Frederick II of Prussia in 1767: "Doubt is not an agreeable condition, but certainty is an absurd one."

VI

So what do you say? Are you willing, able and ready to join us – or are you still sceptical, choosing to stay on the outside?

Well, be it as it may, perhaps I can try to convince you with yet another imaginative turn, not a screw, but by using a metaphor that certainly fascinates us in our life and work.

This takes us to a well-known but still effective saying and reality check: if I can't dance to it, why should I participate? Why should I trust it? Why should I believe in it?

Therefore, we have reached the station called the burden of proof. Can you, can I, can we, individually and collectively, dance to the methods of artistic practice described here and now?

Of course, we can.

As a promise, not proof, I will introduce six songs that you can dance to, and dance not in a pre-paid fashion, but in your personal way and sway,

with and within its current of curious grooves. These are songs that bring us together, give us something called social hope and which show us how there is always a chance to do what we do in a different and sometimes slightly better way.

Thus, the selection of six songs to live, work and thrive by and with – appearing in no particular order, but pay attention, should be played out loud and listened to repeatedly with care and caressing:

- *Keep on Keeping on* (Curtis Mayfield),
- *Trust in a Must* (Ian Dury)
- *Respect* (Aretha Franklin)
- *Protection* (Massive Attack)
- *Let's Get Physical* (Olivia Newton-John)
- *Pleasure, Joy and Happiness* (Eddie Chacon)

And now, at the end of a journey on which we have spent so much time together, following and sometimes getting lost, but hopefully never feeling low or lonely, while chasing word after word, thoughts linked to other thoughts, we have survived some chaos and allowed some doors and windows to be opened, so now, now it is your turn.

What is your version, your method of both dancing and moving along, taking part and playing the part that you choose and are passionate about? What is your song, your method? Not as an answer, not as an ending but as a beginning – to get us going and to, well, keep on keeping on.

Vita Activa it is, and it remains here and now, for you and me, for us individually and collectively, porously accessible and available to be actualised and articulated.

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Notes

1 For an overview of the role of metaphors in creating new realities, see Lakoff & Johnson, 2003.

2 For an overview of the development of late capitalism, see Slobodian, 2023.

3 MacIntyre, 2006, 155.

4 Ibid., 38–39.

5 For an overview of practice-based artistic research, see Hannula et al., 2014.